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ABSTRACT

Two challenges that confront principals attempting to generate effective collaborative planning time with teachers are examined in this document: altering the conventional schedule and ensuring productive use of planning time. Principals, superintendents, and other educators were interviewed about the techniques and outcomes of these two aspects. Strategies used by respondents for finding the time included grants and staff development, creative scheduling, and substitute teaching by administrators and colleagues. Restructuring the weekly schedule is complicated, but the logistical problems can be solved in a variety of ways. Facilitating productive planning time is more elusive, but can be achieved by defining a mission, articulating goals, grouping teachers, providing staff training for collaborative skills, and using agendas and reports. The examples demonstrate that it is possible to provide weekly planning time and to make that time productive. (7 references) (LMI)

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Brief to principals

Collaborative Planning Time for Teachers

An important element of restructured schools is cooperative self-directed planning among teachers. Yet, U.S. teachers work largely in professional isolation. A survey of high school teachers[1] found 46% spend less than one hour a month meeting with colleagues on curriculum and instruction. Another 30% spent between one and five hours per month planning.

Generating effective collaborative planning time confronts principals with two challenges: to alter the conventional schedule to permit planning time, and to assure that the planning time is used productively. For this brief we queried principals, as well as superintendents and other educators, on the techniques and results of these two aspects of collaborative planning. Through a recent survey, the National Education Association has gathered information consistent with this brief. [2]

We hear that logistical problems of reconstructing the weekly schedule, though complicated, can be solved in a variety of ways. However, the second task of facilitating productive joint planning has proven elusive. Principals find themselves in a dilemma. Collaborative planning among teachers is usually envisioned to be a self-directed, teacher-empowering, teacher-centered activity fueled by the experience and vision of the teachers. It is not an activity to be directed or dominated from above. Thus, how can principals facilitate positive outcomes at meetings when they are not even supposed to be there? As posed by Mary Jennings, headmaster of Brookline High School in Massachusetts, "The difficulty is that staff, students and the community simply never lived in any other structure than this 250 year old one we happen to have. They can't imagine different structures. So my job is not only to provide time for them to work together to imagine, but it's also to help them to see other possibilities."

Our interviewees offered the following practical wisdom on both aspects of teacher planning.

Finding the Time

Jennings adopted a two-step approach to creating planning time. First she procured grants to initiate collaboration and bring interested teachers together at a retreat away from school. Then she reconstructed the schedule to build such meetings into the regular school day. At the elementary school level, Roy Ford, principal of Hollibrook Elementary School in Houston, Texas, used administrators and other school professionals as substitute teachers to free the teachers for planning.

New opportunities through grants and staff development: With her first grant, Jennings sponsored a series of "days away" to give teachers an opportunity to consider interdisciplinary curriculum. The ten teachers attending created the first interdisciplinary course, an AIDS seminar, and developed a newsletter for monthly dissemination to the 200 staff members. The restructuring process continued with her second grant two years later, when the headmaster conducted two six-hour workshops for 50 teachers who received stipends for attending. Guest speakers and the initial interdisciplinary team of ten served

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Mary Jennings
Headmaster

as resources for the two six-hour workshops. The group brainstormed new courses. The result: four team-taught, year-long, interdisciplinary courses are available this year. *1) The Mind's Eye*, a study of cross-discipline thinking is taught by a math and an English teacher. *2) Medicine and Society*, a laboratory course studying the history of medicine tutors students in biology and social studies. *3) Principles of Technology*, a team taught course between a civics and industrial arts teacher has students build models which test technological designs. *4) Senior Seminar in Public Policy* has devoted itself to studying the AIDS crisis for the last three years with a social studies, a math, and an English teacher.

Creative scheduling: Jennings revamped the students' schedule with two new goals in mind: to create more planning time and to assure that freshman students have common classmates in at least two classes per day. The latter goal was in response to staff concern that the students are overwhelmed by the large size of the school. Jennings divided the freshman class of 400 into four houses with accompanying housemasters. Each house of 100 is subdivided into 5 clusters of 20 students. Each cluster meets together for two classes in different subjects, preferably back-to-back. The two teachers involved also share a planning period, if possible immediately following their joint students' classes. The housemaster convenes weekly with the two teachers to discuss the progress of the students. Jennings reports that teachers are beginning to appreciate the benefit of planning across subject boundaries and are experimenting with other new collaborative projects.

Substitute teaching by administrators and colleagues: Roy Ford of the elementary school in Houston believes that creative planning requires the teacher's "genuine input, when they are at the top of their intellectual capacities, instead of at a 4:00 pm meeting when they're tired." Thus, he must find time during the school day. His solution was to enlist qualified non-teaching professionals from within the school to substitute teach. Ford and his assistant principals, counselors, social workers, and classroom aides, regularly substitute for one hour time periods. This allows teachers at each grade level to meet together one hour every three weeks. At first, the support staff objected to the assignment which appeared to place them in a role secondary to the teaching staff. However, objections subsided when Ford explained that the substitute teaching helped implement the goals for the school which support staff had helped to shape.

Making Time Productive

The principal must guide with an invisible and distant hand, not participating directly in the joint planning meeting of teachers. "We need to be the wind beneath their wings," says Karen Simpson, principal of Newbraunfels Middle School in Newbraunfels, Texas. The role of the principal extends from the global, such as generating a school mission, to the more particular, such as grouping teachers in a way to foster productivity.

Defining a mission: Most of our interviewees emphasized that productive planning time depends upon connection to a clear school mission. The task of nurturing staff commitment to a mission is a complicated, but necessary first step. At Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks, Alaska, teachers verbalized a school-wide weakness in math and science. They designed a staff development plan which educated them in these subjects and that uniquely fit the new mission of a "discovery school," says Principal David Hagstrom. Some teachers left, but most sought the new challenges. Currently, they focus planning time on converting the mission to more specific curricular goals.

Articulating goals for curriculum, pedagogy, and student learning: Too often teachers will meet, but not proceed far enough to positively affect student learning. Working together may generate feelings of success, but result in only minimal changes, says Gary Wehlage, Associate Director of the Center.

"Consider possible school changes on a continuum. On the low end two teachers team together, say an English and a geography teacher. The English teacher pulls 15 vocabulary words from the geography lesson. The exercise shows a willingness for team-teaching and an effort by teachers

of different subjects to reinforce one another's content. But joint teaching of selected concepts may not improve students' learning experiences. On the more impressive end, two teachers might discuss the knowledge which spans two topics and the experiences they wish to make available to the students. They could investigate community and other resources to facilitate in-depth learning. For example, the English and geography teacher might coordinate a student project to study alternative uses of urban space, using residents' oral histories along with proposals of experts in the field."

Grouping teachers: Deciding which teachers to free at the same time for meetings reflects the goals of the school and principal, says Laura Cooper, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Concord Massachusetts. "Time is one of the most valuable resources we have in schools, and one of the scarcest commodities. If you decide to group by grade level, it's because you think that arena is the most essential. If you put people in a grade level group, you're not able to put them in a more vertical configuration that would allow them to look at how we sequence curriculum."

Staff training for collaborative skills: To plan effectively, teachers must also have skills in collaboration. Many do not, and few have had an opportunity to develop them. "Schools need to investigate the skills and supports necessary to make meetings work productively. It won't happen automatically," says Concord's Assistant Superintendent Cooper. She aides her teachers by assigning a facilitator to the meetings to demonstrate collaborative skills. Cooper also says that the expanded roles of the teacher must be defined. "What is expected of the teachers in the collaborative planning? Will they be evaluated on their contributions during planning time?"

Lynn Solo, principal of Graham and Parks Alternative School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, initiated planning by first meeting with teachers for one year to reinforce effective collaboration techniques. After the year, the meetings continue without Solo, but with a teacher representative leading the meetings. Solo requests an update from each meeting. Presently, the K-8 school contains six interdisciplinary teams which assemble once per month. In addition, subject-specific teams meet once per month for staff development training.

Agendas and reports: Roy Ford won't tolerate "administrivia," those nagging procedural items that clutter staff meetings. Items that can be treated through written memos should be excluded from planning meetings, which should be reserved for more substantial fare.

Ford asks for an agenda before each of his teachers' joint meetings, and minutes of the key decisions afterwards. He also joins each group for the first 15 minutes which may help promote collaborative discussion and skills. He calls the next step critical for school climate: Give the team feedback on their meeting report and if appropriate, implement their ideas. If not, tell them the reason.

Obviously, the degree of principal involvement must be tailored to the specific school situation.

These examples demonstrate that in the otherwise increasingly hectic schedule of teachers it is possible to provide planning time. Principals have also suggested specific approaches to making the planning time productive. Ultimate success will depend on subtle aspects of school context and principal leadership. We hope these points can help guide the effort.

1 Moles, O. (Ed.). (1988). High school and beyond: Administrator and teacher survey (1984) Data File User's Manual. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

2. See NEA Today, *December 1991. A survey report on planning time in restructured schools will be available in April 1992. To receive a copy, write to NEA National Center for Innovation, 1201 16th St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.*

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"Time is one of the most valuable resources we have in schools, and one of the scarcest commodities."

Laura Cooper
Assistant Superintendent

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